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Bomb Informer's Tapes Give Rare Glimpse of F.B.I. Dealings

By RICHARD BERNSTEIN with RALPH BLUMENTHAL

Correction Appended

It is shortly after a bomb has blown a hole five stories deep at the World Trade Center and an F.B.I. agent is talking to Emad A. Salem, the former Egyptian army officer who is the bureau's secret source of information, its most valuable undercover operative.

But rather than talk about the conspiracy, about who was involved in it and how it was done, Mr. Salem's concerns are more mundane, involving unpaid parking tickets, the tolls he pays as he travels between New York and New Jersey, the expenses of using his own car to carry out his informer's duties.

"Let them give me a car to run the investigation," Mr. Salem says. "Yesterday I went to New Jersey. I went to Brooklyn, and I was in Manhattan. How do you expect me to run all of that? By subway?"

That remark, a bit of minutiae in the care and feeding of an informer, is included in the more than 900 pages of transcripts detailing the conversations Mr. Salem secretly recorded with the F.B.I. agents assigned to him. The transcripts of those recordings provide a rare and intimate glimpse into the complex, delicate, often mutually manipulative relationship between Mr. Salem and the F.B.I., a relationship in which Mr. Salem's commonly wounded feelings are matched by the F.B.I.'s efforts to cajole and offer sympathy.

Transcripts of the tapes were turned over last week to defense lawyers in two cases, the ongoing World Trade Center bombing trial and the second case, which involves 15 men accused of plotting to blow up other targets in New York. The transcripts, which were put under seal by a Federal judge, have been obtained by The New York Times.

The transcripts are replete with new allegations about what the authorities have called the most damaging terrorist attack in American history and the larger conspiracy related to it. The transcripts are like spotlights, providing bursts of illumination in the still-dark arena of the case, so that faces, names and actions appear in the light, and then, the moment of illumination over, seem to fade again. Mr. Salem's specific allegations cannot be confirmed independently but they are clearly taken seriously by the F.B.I. agents.

The transcripts show the torment of the F.B.I. agents and of Mr. Salem over whether the attack on the World Trade Center could have been prevented, as Mr. Salem repeatedly and furiously insists, and whether the decision to pull him off the case six months before the explosion was a fatal blunder. Mr. Salem tells the F.B.I. that he himself was recruited into the bombing conspiracy in 1992 by El Sayyid A. Nosair, the man accused of killing Rabbi Meir Kahane in 1990. In Mr. Salem's account, Mr. Nosair emerges for the first time as a central figure in the trade center plot. Mr. Salem also says he knows that Mr. Nosair, who was acquitted of the Kahane killing but sentenced to 7 1/2 to 22 1/2 years in prison on related charges, actually killed Rabbi Kahane.

"He told me," Mr. Salem says.

Mr. Salem also tells the F.B.I. agents that Mr. Nosair first asked Mr. Salem to carry out major roles in the making of a bomb. He suggests that it was when he demurred, arguing that he was too busy with other things, that Mr. Nosair recruited some of the figures now on trial in the World Trade Center case, specifically, Mohammed A. Salameh and Mahmud Abouhalima.

The transcripts also disclose some tantalizing new allegations concerning Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman, who preached in mosques in both Brooklyn and Jersey City that were attended by many of the defendants in the conspiracy case. Mr. Salem says that Mr. Abdel Rahman asked him to assassinate the Egyptian President, Hosni Mubarak. Mr. Salem also alleges that Mr. Abdel Rahman had close contacts with Hamas, the extremist Palestinian organization.

The transcripts offer new details on how the F.B.I. tracked Mr. Abouhalima, the Egyptian-born, 33-year-old taxi driver, who is one of the key suspects in the trade center case.

"Let me tell you something, how we uh, how we came across Mahmud," John Anticev, an F.B.I. agent, says. "We knew Mahmud . . . uh . . . as one of the organizers for the uh, the training," the agent continued, referring to paramilitary training carried out by some of the figures later indicted in the conspiracy cases and discovered by the F.B.I. around 1990. The transcript continues with Mr. Anticev telling Mr. Salem that Mr. Abouhalima taught military skills at training camps maintained by the group.

Anticev: "You know, up in Long Island?"

Salem: "Yeah."

Anticev: "And out in, uh, Connecticut."

Salem: "Yeah."

Anticev: "O.K.? And we knew that he was a, you know, big guy, went back and forth to Afghanistan and we also knew that he was very involved, uh . . . you know -- "

Salem: "Yeah."

Anticev: "With teaching."

"Listen to this, this is funny," Mr. Anticev continues, telling Mr. Salem that the F.B.I. examined Mr. Nosair's phone records, finding that the person he called most often was "a person called Weber." Surprised that Mr. Nosair would have frequent contact with someone with a German name, Mr. Anticev and a partner, Detective Louis Napoli, tracked down the address of "Weber" on Fifth Avenue and 71st Street in Brooklyn. 'Who Is This Weber?'

"And we knock on the door and somebody, American guy, answers on another floor, and we go, 'Who is this Weber?' and the guy goes, 'Him? I think this guy's a terrorist,' " Mr. Anticev says.

"We go, 'Why?' 'Well he has all these Arabs up there all the time, and this and that . . . uh . . . he has magazines about bombs and stuff like," and I go, 'Well, Weber?' He goes, 'Yeah, but his real name is, is Mahmud Abouhalima.' "

"And I just looked at Louie you know," Mr. Anticev concludes. "We said, 'Bingo.' " Weber turned out to be the maiden name of Mr. Abouhalima's wife, Marianne.

One week before the bombing, Mr. Salem later tells the F.B.I., Mr. Salameh and Mr. Abouhalima visited Mr. Nosair in the Attica prison. Mr. Salem chastises the F.B.I., saying that if they had been conducting proper surveillance, they would have learned of the bombing before it happened.

Yet another intriguing possibility suggested by the transcripts is that there were at one point other would-be bombers active around New York.

"Why do you think I'm going crazy for?," Mr. Anticev says. "'Cause I see the potential, the potential is there."

Mr. Salem says that, as an infiltrator in another group, he actually purchased a timer in a separate plot whose goal was to explode 12 bombs simultaneously around the city. Disdain for the Sheik

Another frequent refrain is Mr. Salem's disdain for the group he had infiltrated, especially the sheik, whom Mr. Salem sarcastically refers to as "the Prince."

For example, he accuses Mr. Abdel Rahman of hypocrisy, saying that he publicly condemned the World Trade Center bombing and contended that violence was against Islamic principle.

"Like he's coming on Channel One say, 'Well I know nothing . . . Islam is sweet and cute and we never talk violence,' " Mr. Salem says, adding, however, that he had five instances on tape of the sheik advocating violence.

Mr. Salem also spends time in person and on the telephone striving to get Mr. Abdel Rahman, as Mr. Salem puts it, to "strangle himself" with incriminating statements.

Mr. Salem tries to get him to admit that he knows the trade center bombing defendants, but all the

sheik says is: "I know thousands and millions know me."

Throughout, the transcripts reveal the mood of guilt and recrimination in the wake of the devastating trade center blast. In one early conversation secretly taped by Mr. Salem while riding in a car with two F.B.I. agents soon after the explosion, the informer and the agents argue whether Mr. Salem had specifically informed them months earlier that the attack on the World Trade Center would take place.

"I told you so, that this is one of the targets," Mr. Salem says. "You forgot. You have your papers. Go back to it. World Trade Center, Empire State Building, Grand Central. Times Square."

"I looked over my notes," one of the agents, John Anticev, says. "I didn't see anything about a target." To this, Detective Napoli, says: "I was there also. I don't remember you saying target." Details -- Great and Small

After the bomb went off at the trade center, Mr. Salameh, who had been dropped as an F.B.I. informer was put on again, and he used his contacts with the sheik and the men around him to collect much of the intelligence that led to their indictments several months later. Most of the taped conversations with the F.B.I. -- there are 70 of them in all but only 45 have been released -- took place during this last phase of Mr. Salem's work as an informer, after the explosion.

The conversations contain many small details. There is the present of a watch dropped off by an agent at Mr. Salem's home for his birthday. There are conversations about kids, about getting enough sleep and about Mr. Salem's sadness about the death of his mother-in-law. There are lessons in the proper pronunciation of Arabic names and in being sure to push the numbers key when using a telephone beeper.

But many of the exchanges reveal an emotionally complex, often tormented, always multifaceted relationship, one in which Mr. Salem frequently returns to two subjects: one, his hurt at having been dropped by the F.B.I. earlier; two, his claim, as he put it to Mr. Anticev, that the F.B.I. failed to do its job in preventing the World Trade Center attack.

"All of these things, you didn't think it was serious," Mr. Salem says of the information he claims to have provided to the F.B.I. "You didn't think."

"We knew it was serious," Detective Napoli replies and continues: "It wasn't that we didn't believe you. It was just that the only way, you could have, to stay, was that you had to testify."

In this, the F.B.I. seems to hint at an overall quandary that it faced with Mr. Salem, and indeed faces in all cases in which the need to quietly collect intelligence conflicts with the need to build a criminal case that follows legal guidelines. To build a proper case agents wanted Mr. Salem to wear a hidden body recorder, which would have documented his information for courtroom testimony but also would have heightened the risk to him.

"We couldn't let you make a bomb and then give that bomb to whoever," Agent Anticev tells Mr.

Salem, adding "because later on if that bomb, let's say goes off at a synagogue and kills two, three people, and that it comes out that, that, an agent of the F.B.I. participated in making the bomb, forget it, they would go berserk. The press would say we knew, we'd be sued, people would be fired." Temptations and Trust

When, after the bombing, the F.B.I. tries to lure Mr. Salem back into his informer's role, agents try to tempt him with the prospect of being put into the Witness Protection Program.

"Ya know, new life, with a new name, in any part of the country that you like," Mr. Anticev tells Mr. Salem, "would be yours for the asking." Since arrests in the second bombing case in June, Mr. Salem has dropped out of sight.

And there is a paradoxical theme of trust, or the lack of it, between the bureau and its confidential informer. Mr. Salem complains frequently that the F.B.I. has no faith in him. At one point, he refers angrily to having been given a lie detector test by an F.B.I. supervisor. Another time, he protests over having been patted down at one meeting. But even as he protests, he is secretly recording his conversations with the F.B.I. agents, either through a phone jack or through bugging devices in his car or on his body.

At least once, Mr. Salem clearly tells the F.B.I. that he has been taping his conversations with agents, and at one point he even tells them, in what appears to be an attempt at blackmail, that he put the tapes in a safe place and "wrote a message if, God forbid, something wrong happened to me from the F.B.I., these tapes gotta be sold to one of the uh, ah, ah, C.N.N. or, ya know, I did something like that to protect my heirs."

The earliest recordings go back roughly two years to the time when El Sayyid Nosair was on trial in the Kahane murder case. Mr. Salem describes the mood of tension that gripped Mr. Nosair's supporters, some of whom were later indicted in the World Trade Center case and the larger conspiracy. He also talks about the joyful response of the men to Mr. Nosair's acquittal of the murder charge, and both he and Mr. Anticev agree that the jury was "stupid" not to have found Mr. Nosair guilty. Excerpts of F.B.I. Agent's Conversation With Informer

In undated transcripts of conversations after the World Trade Center bombing, an F.B.I. agent, Nancy Floyd, tells a Government informer, Emad A. Salem, that she believes the bureau mishandled the investigation of suspected terrorists before the blast. Mr. Salem, referred to as "Amid," suggests to her that he go to the President. FLOYD I said that the bottom line comes to this, is that my opinion is this thing was handled completely wrong from the very beginning . . .

SALEM Uh huh.

FLOYD That, um, as you know, we deal with people all the time in intelligence and the, um, and in our area we get people to give us information, so that we know what's going on . . .

SALEM Uh huh.

FLOYD We're not interested in arresting people, etc. Obviously, there are times when, you know, we find out that an American citizen is selling secrets, or whatever, we have to stop them. . . .

FLOYD And I said, just like, you know, the I.R.A., I said, you know, what do you think that the Brits got caught with their pants down because they thought that, you know, that it would only happen in Ireland?

SALEM Uh huh . . .

FLOYD And then when they started blowing up in London they realized that they, you know, that these people would take their cause wherever they have to to further the cause.

SALEM Uh huh.

FLOYD I said, you have to monitor these people. You have to know what's going on. I said Amid was even shocked that we allowed these people in the country in the first place!

FLOYD So, I mean, you know, I told them that you know, that, I didn't think that there's . . . I felt that the people on the squad, that they didn't have a clue of how to operate these things. That the supervisors didn't know what was going on. That they hadn't taken the time to learn the history or to sit down and talk to him and use him for knowledge.

SALEM Uh huh. . . .

FLOYD I know they had something going, but I know that it was poo-pooed and I know that's part of the, ah, problem, and that's one of the things they're looking at.

SALEM You think it's a good idea to meet Mr., ah, the President, Bill Clinton, to let him know?

FLOYD Huh?

SALEM To, do you think it's a good idea to meet the President, let him know?

FLOYD Ah.

SALEM I can call him and ask to meet him.

FLOYD As in President Clinton?

SALEM Ya.

FLOYD Well I mean you could, I mean, you could, as a U.S. citizen you can talk to whoever you want to talk to, but I mean I think that you might want to see if you can get in touch, you know, talk with [deputy New York City F.B.I. director William] Gavin and sit down and . . .

Photo: Emad A. Salem, right, a Federal Bureau of Investigation informer, in Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman's home after a news conference in June. (Dith Pran/The New York Times)